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ABSTRACT

This issue brief contains statistical information on the number of adults participating in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses in the United States. Particular questions addressed include these: Which non-english speaking adults have taken or may be interested in taking ESL classes? Why did ESL participants take the classes, and how did they find the classes they took? Where did adults take ESL classes, and what were the costs? and What are the barriers to ESL participation? The information summarized in the report suggests that younger adults, more recent immigrants, and people whose highest level of education was a high school diploma or equivalent were more likely to have participated in ESL classes in the previous 12 months. Among those who said they were interested in taking an ESL class, but had not, most reported that they did not know about any ESL classes that were available. Among those who wanted to take an ESL class and were aware of opportunities, the main barriers reported were time, money, and child care/transportation. (JL)

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Adult Participation in English-as-a-Second-Language(ESL) Classes: Issue Brief

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ISSUE BRIEF

Adult Participation in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Classes

May 1998

In 1990, there were about 25.5 million U.S. adults age 18 and older who spoke a language other than English at home, up from 17.9 million a decade earlier, according to Census data. Many of these non-English speakers were new immigrants. However, some immigrants have lived here for many years, and some non-English speakers were born in the United States. Many of these adults reported that they have difficulty speaking English, but they were highly motivated to learn the language, especially to obtain jobs and gain access to educational opportunities (Chisman 1989; U.S. Department of Education 1995).

As the number of non-English speaking residents has increased, the demand for placement in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes has grown each year. With this heightened demand, there are long waiting lists for ESL classes in many parts of the country (Bliss 1990; Chisman 1989; Crandall 1993; U.S. Department of Education 1995; Griffith 1993).

Until now, fashioning plans to meet the demand for ESL services has been made more difficult by the lack of nationally representative information on the characteristics of adults who take ESL classes and on those who want to do so but have found barriers that prevent them from participation in ESL classes. The 1995 National Household Education Survey (NHES) provides nationally representative information to contribute to filling these information needs.

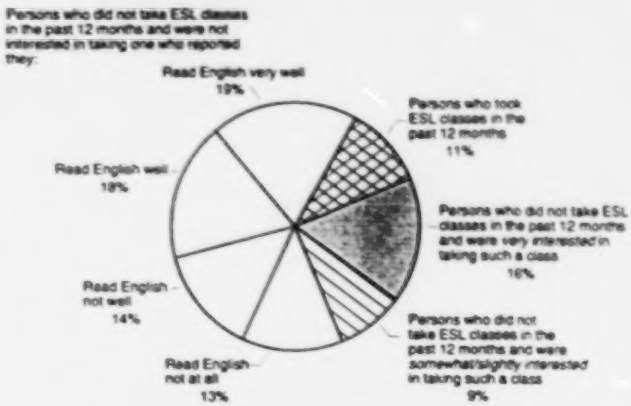
According to the NHES:95, about 12 million U.S. adults age 16 and older speak something other than English as their *primary* home language. The study asked members of this group about their participation in ESL classes during the previous 12 months, their interest in ESL classes, and various barriers that may have prevented them from participating in such classes. Interviews for the NHES were conducted in English or Spanish; hence, there may be some underreporting for persons who could not speak either language.

Which non-English speaking adults have taken or may be interested in taking ESL classes?

As shown in figure 1, about 11 percent of the population of interest reported that they had participated in ESL classes in the 12 months prior to the study. About 25 percent had not taken ESL classes in the previous year, but were *very interested* (16 percent) or *somewhat/slightly interested* (9 percent) in doing so. The other 64 percent reported that they had not participated in ESL classes in the previous year and were not interested in participating. Over half of these persons reported that they could read English "very well" or "well." The rest of the nonparticipating adults who were not interested in ESL classes reported that they read English "not well" or "not at all."

Younger adults were more likely than older adults to have taken ESL classes in the past year (table 1). Of those ages 16 to 25, 19 percent participated in ESL classes, compared with 4 percent of respondents 46 years and older. Fourteen percent of non-English speakers with a high school diploma or equivalent but no postsecondary education had taken an ESL class, compared with 8 percent who had not finished high school.

Figure 1.—Participation and interest profile of the population of interest* for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes: 1994–95


Persons who did not take ESL classes in the past 12 months and were not interested in taking one who reported they:
Read English very well 19%
Persons who took ESL classes in the past 12 months 11%
Read English well 18%
Persons who did not take ESL classes in the past 12 months and were very interested in taking such a class 16%
Read English not well 14%
Persons who did not take ESL classes in the past 12 months and were somewhat/slightly interested in taking such a class 9%
Read English not at all 13%

* Includes civilian, noninstitutionalized adults, age 16 or older, not enrolled in elementary or secondary school at the time of the interview, and whose primary language at home was any language other than English.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES), spring 1995.

Recency of immigration and current English language ability also were related to ESL participation. Recent immigrants (those in the country no more than 5 years) took ESL classes at the highest rate. Also, those who reported that they could read English "well" or "not well" were more likely to have taken an ESL class than were respondents who said that they could read English "very well."

Among those who had not taken a class in the previous 12 months but were interested, adults 26- to 45-years-old, those who reported they read English less than "very well," and persons who immigrated less than 25 years ago were more likely to say they were interested in taking such a class.

Why did ESL participants take the classes, and how did they find the classes they took?

Of the population of interest who participated in ESL classes, 42 percent did so as part of a college program. An additional 29 percent said they took ESL classes to improve communication skills, 14 percent said they took the classes for a personal, family, or social reason, and the remaining 15 percent said they took the classes for job-related reasons, to improve basic skills, to meet requirements for a diploma or some other certificate, or for some other reason. Among the ESL participants whose classes were not part of a college program, about 74 percent had learned about the classes from family, friends, neighbors, or employers, while 26 percent learned about the classes from newspapers, radio, or some other source.

Table 1.—Percentage and number of the population of interest* for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, by participation status and adult characteristics: 1994–95

Characteristics	Number of adults* (in thousands)	Participants (percent)	Nonparticipants		
			Number (in thousands)	Percent interested in taking ESL classes	Percent not interested in taking ESL classes
Total	**12,078**	**11**	**10,777**	**28**	**72**
Age					
16 to 25 years	2,104	19	1,712	22	78
26 to 35 years	3,443	13	2,988	34	66
36 to 45 years	3,157	10	2,839	33	67
46 years and older	3,374	4	3,238	20	80
Educational attainment					
Less than high school diploma	4,947	8	4,571	31	69
High school diploma or equivalent	4,498	14	3,855	28	72
Some postsecondary education or more	2,633	11	2,351	22	78
How long lived in the United States					
2 years or less	973	31	668	41	59
3 to 5 years	1,354	27	987	34	66
6 to 9 years	1,878	9	1,703	39	61
10 to 24 years	4,202	9	3,832	33	67
25 years or more	1,731	3	1,680	15	85
Born in the United States	1,939	2	1,905	11	89
Self-reported reading ability in English					
Read English "very well"	2,630	5	2,513	9	91
Read English "well"	3,340	12	2,948	25	75
Read English "not well"	3,557	16	3,001	43	57
Read English "not at all"	2,551	9	2,314	33	67

*Includes civilian, noninstitutionalized adults, age 16 or older, not enrolled in elementary or secondary school at the time of the interview, and whose primary language at home was any language other than English.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES), spring 1995.

Where did adults take ESL classes, and what were the costs?

Nearly two-thirds of those taking ESL classes outside of a college program were taking them at an elementary school, a secondary school, or a college, the remainder took classes provided by a private organization, a business, or government or some other provider. More than one-third of these participants reported that they did not spend any of their own money for tuition or expenses for the classes. Another one-third reported that they spent $100 or less to take the class, while the remainder spent more than $100 for the class. For those who paid for their ESL classes, the average amount spent was $185.

What are the barriers to ESL participation?

Among the 12 million adults whose primary home language was a language other than English, about 25 percent reported that they were interested in taking an ESL class but had not done so in the past 12 months. Of those 3 million adults, 59 percent said they did not know of any classes. When respondents knew about classes, the main barriers that prevented them from taking a class were *not enough time* (40 percent), *cost of the class* (26 percent), and *child care/transportation* (23 percent). The cost of an ESL class was perceived to be a major barrier even though two-thirds of the adults who took an ESL class within the previous year spent $100 or less for such a class.

Summary

Younger adults, more recent immigrants, and persons whose highest education was a high school diploma or equivalent were more likely to have participated in ESL classes in the previous 12 months. Among those who said they were interested in taking an ESL class but had not, most reported that they did not know about any ESL classes that were available. Among those who wanted to take an ESL class and were aware of opportunities, the main barriers reported were time, money, and child care/transportation.

In future studies, several issues merit attention. For example, in the NHES:95, only those adults who said they were interested in taking ESL classes were asked about perceived barriers. But, it is quite possible that many people reported no interest in taking an ESL class precisely because such barriers appeared insurmountable, thus discouraging them from ever hoping to take such a class.

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Edith McArthur, National Center for Education Statistics, Data Development and Longitudinal Studies Group, 202-219-1442 or Edith_McArthur@ed.gov. For additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616. NCES publications are available on the Internet at http://www.NCES.ed.gov/.